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ABSTRACT

Dialects have features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation that distinguish them from other varieties of a language; they exist in all languages and occur when members of one group communicate more among themselves than they do with speakers of another group. Black English vernacular (BEV) is a fully formed linguistic system with its own rules of syntax and pronunciation and should not be considered an unworthy approximation of standard English. Although linguists have viewed use of BEV as a deficiency, it has never been demonstrated that a dialect has a significant effect on school achievement except when school personnel's attitudes toward dialects have contributed to poor performance. Of the four alternatives used in teaching reading to dialect speakers (teaching the child to speak standard dialect and then beginning reading instruction in standard dialect, using instructional materials written in the nonstandard dialect, allowing the child to translate materials written in the nonstandard dialect into the indigenous dialect, or using the language experience approach), empirical data do not specifically support the use of any one over the others. Emotional and social factors appear to be more significant than linguistic factors in affecting the school performance of nonstandard dialect speakers. (TJ)

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DIALECT AND LEARNING TO READ

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INTRODUCTION

In G. Bernard Shaw's wonderful play of the Pygmalion legend, there is a point where the flower girl says that it is not the way you speak that makes the difference between a flower girl and a lady, but the way that you are treated. To this Professor Higgins might well have replied, "But my dear, how you speak affects the way that you are treated." And, we would add this is so in the real world too, where language often acts as a gatekeeper rather than as a facilitator of understanding. Shaw's flower girl and professor spoke the same language, but their widely divergent varieties of it created a distance between them as real as any in space or time.

Different speech communities exist in all languages. Tied by facts of social class, geographical region or some other bond, the members of these communities manifest their kinship linguistically through the dialects they speak. According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, dialect is a variety of language that is used by one group of persons and has features of vocabulary (lexis), grammar (syntax), and pronunciation (phonology) which distinguish it from other varieties used by other groups. In American English, with one exception, all dialects can be comprehended

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by speakers of other dialects, though imperfectly at first. The one exception is a dialect called Gullah which is spoken by approximately 250,000 rural blacks along the southeastern coast of the United States from South Carolina to the Florida border (King, 1977). There are greater similarities across American English dialect boundaries than there are differences. Americans are able to understand many different dialects but are unable to produce most of them. In some other languages ,however, (e.g., Italian), dialects are so dissimilar that they function more as separate languages than as different varieties of a single language. This paper will concern itself with those dialects which are accessible to all speakers of a given language, and will use the American dialect black English vernacular for illustrative purposes.

Dialects exist when individuals of one group communicate among themselves more than they do with speakers of another group. Various professions, occupations, and hobbies have dialects of their own which consist primarily of specialized vocabularies called jargon. Also, age-related groups share dialects of sorts. For example, I overheard this exchange in a large store some time back. An elderly woman asked a salesperson in the linens department to show her some counterpanes. Counterpane is now a rather archaic term for blanket or coverlet. Her request was met by a look of bewilderment.

"We have no counterpanes," the salesperson replied somewhat annoyed." "Oh no," said the elderly shopper, equally agitated, "then what are those (pointing to the blankets ?" There are also dialect differences that are determined on the basis of geography. For example, the word g-r-e-a-s-y rhymes with fleecy in the northern sections of the United States. It rhymes with easy in the South. In the northeast we call the small staircase leading to a house a stoop, elsewhere it's called a porch. The example of the flower girl in Shaw's play exemplifies the social class factor in dialect.

Rarely, except in the case of young children, do we find anyone who speaks only one dialect. Instead, individuals vary their dialect according to the context or social setting. Labov (1970) calls this style shifting. He says that all individuals will show some variation in phonological and syntactical rules according to the immediate context in which they are speaking. For example, Labov found that in New York City certain speakers evidence some style shifting in the pronunciation of -r as in car, so that in more formal situations they will use more -r, and in casual speech almost none at all. In New York, -r lessness is perceived negatively. It is not in other parts of the United States or in other native English-speaking countries. Why this is so is uncertain. Perhaps it has something to do with the historical origins of -r lessness in New York as McDavid (1977) has traced

them. He believes New Yorkers adopted this linguistic trait from their close association with the British before and during the Revolutionary War, and afterwards through New York's mercantile relations with England. Another example of the effect of context on speech has been found in Puerto Rican bilingual children aged 6 to 12 years in New York City. Such youngsters know significantly more English words for education and religion than Spanish words. They know more Spanish words for home and family (Ervin-Tripp, 1972).

Of the three characteristics of language -- sound, vocabulary and grammar -- we are more tolerant of variations in pronunciation and vocabulary than in grammar. In American English, for example, peppering one's speech with loan words from other dialects is a matter of prestige. Using, in appropriate contexts, such words as bread, macho, klutz, hip, cool is taken as a mark of sophistication. The social impact of borrowing an occasional word and embedding it into a prestige dialect is quite another matter, however, from the effect of a low-prestige dialect which is characterized by variations in sound, lexicon, and syntax. The fact remains that dialect differences do act as social class barriers. For example, the pronunciation of mad, bad, and glad, in the regional dialect called Brooklynese in the United States immediately sets up in the mind of the listener a negative image of the speaker's social status.

DIALECT - A CASE IN POINT

There are many nonstandard dialects -- those which depart from standard,, informal usage. In American English, Brooklynese, Spanglish, and black English would all fall into this category. The one which has been most intensively studied and discussed is black English vernacular (BEV). This label may be misleading for two reasons. First, the ethnic identification might lead one to assume that this is a genetic characteristic. Of course, it is not. Many black people have never spoken BEV, while persons of other etnic groups may speak BEV, if this is the dialect of their speech community. In addition, certain standard regional dialects share some features of BEV such as the homophonous pin and pen, and the absence of /r/ in certain linguistic contexts (e.g., pak the cah, No'th Ca'lina) (Goodman and Sims,1974).

Second, there is no single black dialect which speakers use all the time, regardless of context. BEV speakers engage in style shifting according to the social context, just as all speakers do (Fasold and Wolfram, 1970).

The origin and development of BEV is inextricably woven into the complex history of the Atlantic slave trade (Stewart, 1967). It is important to understand that BEV evolved into a fully formed linguistic systen with its own rules of syntax and pronunciation. It is not an unworthy approximation of standard English. In the United States BEV is spoken by some, though not all,

low-income black persons. It shows a good deal of consistency throughout the United States, and it is used by many school-children in large, urban centers. Thus, BEV is an important concern to teachers and other school personnel.

To give you a sense of BEV, here are some of its major syntactical features:

1. Absence of the "s" in the third person singular, present indicative

   Example: Her mother work in school.

   (Her mother works in school).

2. Zero copula

   a) No link between a subject and its direct object

   Example: She a good girl

   (She is a good girl.)

   b) No link between a subject and participle or a subject and its modifier in the predicate

   Example: She going to the movies

   (She is going to the movies)

   Mary happy because it's her birthday

   (Mary is happy because it's her birthday.)

3. Double Negation

   Example: He didn't have no fun.

   (He didn't have any fun.)

4. Substitution of "did" or "can" for the "if" expression of choice or a possible action.

Example: She asked me did I see the teacher.

(She asked me if I saw the teacher.)

5. Zero past marker

absence of -ed, -t, and -d affixes to regular verbs in the past tense

Example: He drop the ball.

(He dropped the ball.)

6. Zero possessive marker

Example: They found their father key.

(They found their father's key.)

7. Zero plural marker

Example: All the children washed their hand.

(All the children washed their hands.)

8. Use of "be" in a habitual or temporal sense.

Example: He be working

(He is regularly employed.)

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Dialect acts as a social class marker, an index of one's status in the community, Traditionally, the move upward on the social ladder has meant not only an emulation of dress and manners,

but linguistic style, as well. Indeed, language has always played a major role in the power relations among groups. The conquest of a land often meant the victor's imposition of its language on the vanquished. Even to this day, a government's language policy can result in a great response from those whom the policy affects. Sometimes, this response is positive as was the case when the South African government suspended a directive making Africaans mandatory in tribal schools. Sometimes the reaction is quite angry as when New Delhi's language policy sent thousands of students into the streets to protest the designation of Hindi as the lingua franca in state schools (Liams, 1977).

Whether it is by explicit government mandate or implicit social pressure, the imposition of a dialect or a separate language upon a dominated group by a dominant group invariably involves conflict. Gaarder (1975) draws an interesting distinction in learning a second language which can apply, as well, to learning another dialect. He calls this distinction obligatory versus voluntary bilingualism. In voluntary bilingualism, individuals select to become bilingual by their own (or their parents') free choice. The skill is acquired from family members, tutors, servants, special schools or classes, or trips abroad. This kind of bilingualism is elitist, voluntary and academic. Obligatory bilingualism is a collective

phenomenon which occurs when one group must learn a second language in order to survive in its society. The parallels to dialect are obvious. An individual who borrows words from a low status dialect and uses them because it is smart or the "in" thing to do might be said to be practicing voluntary bidialectalism. On the other hand, the individual who must learn an acceptable standard dialect in order to survive a job interview is experiencing obligatory bidialectalism. There are numerous examples of obligatory bilingualism: in America, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans (Chicanos) must learn English; Catalans in Spain must learn Spanish; Indians in South and North America must learn Portuguese or Spanish or English. Obligatory bilingualism is a one-sided phenomenon, since it is the subordinate and not the dominant group which becomes bilingual. Wolff (1967) found, for example, in a study of coastal and interior tribes of Southern Nigeria that the coastal tribe which controlled the trade of the area spoke the preferred tongue. Members of the inland tribe had to be bilingual in order to function economically. Members of the coastal tribe, however, did not learn the dialect of the inland tribe. The economic correlates of these languistic power relations among groups was observed, as well, by Weber (1967) who found that Mayan Indian mothers who wanted

their children to be able to work at occupations other than farming, taught them Spanish early in their lives.

Although the signs may be somewhat obscured or more subtle, the pressures impinging on speakers of a low-prestige dialect are as real as in the case of obligatory bilingualism. BEV offers an excellent example. Despite the fact that BEV is acknowledged by language scholars to be a fully developed system equal in its communicative function to any other dialect in its base language, it continues to be characterized as "sloppy", "lazy", or "bad English" by both black and white persons (Schwartz, 1975). Moreover, the integrity of the dialect has been attacked as either the romanticizing of racial myth, or another attempt to prevent the economic assimilation of black people in America (Rustin, 1971). Where the issue takes on added significance for educators is in its pedagogical consequences. Is it the school's role in working with BEV speakers to use this dialect as the language of instruction? Most surveys of attitudes on this question say no (DeStefano, 1971; Goodman, 1969; Labov, 1969; Stewart, 1969). Or, should the school attempt to dispose of BEV entirely and replace it with a standard school dialect? How does this dialect affect school achievement in general, and learning to read specifically?

DIALECT AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

In the 1960's, the predominant view of the linguistic performance of BEV speakers was one of language deficiency.

The deficit model considered this dialect to be underdeveloped, defective and restricted in significant ways. As an extension of this conception, various intervention programs were developed which varied from quite informal to highly structured, but which uniformly sought to remediate this deficiency, and to compensate for it. Because the children's language retarded their school performance, it was argued, remediating their language would facilitate their academic progress. Since about 1970, however, a language difference model has been propounded which says that BEV is a different, yet highly structured and developed system which is not inferior to standard dialect (Stewart, 1970 ; Stodolsky and Lesser, 1967 ; Wolfram, 1970). Rather than being linguistically deprived, this position argues that black children in urban environments receive much verbal stimulation and participate in a highly verbal culture (Labov, 1972). The language community in which these children participate is different than [illegible] but not inferior to standard American English. For the language difference model, the instructional goal of the school is not to obliterate or even change the child's dialect, but to add to it in order to enable the child to use standard English competently in those contexts where it would be preferred.

The proposition that dialect has measurably significant effect on school achievement has never been demonstrated

in fact, although it is a widely held popular belief. Hall and Turner (1974)for example, after a careful review of empirical data on the relationship between BEV and school success, found no support for the notion that dialect difference itself contributes to school failure. Walker (1975) investigated the effect of Newfoundland dialect on the oral reading performance of third-grade children and found that the syntactical differences between their dialect and the standard English reading materials did not interfere with reading achievement. The proposition that difficulties might arise as a result of incompatabilities in the indigenous and school dialect's syntax, phonology and lexicon might have some validity in the area of oral reading. Yet, from a review of the research, Harber and Bryen (1976) conclude that although there is some evidence of dialect interference in the performance of BEV speakers in oral reading (e.g., Hunt, 1974-75), the evidence is not unequivocal.

Rather than the dialect itself, perhaps it is the attitudes of school personnel toward the low-prestige dialect which contributes to poor scholastic performance. Indeed, there is empirical evidence to support the existence of such attitudes. Williams and Whitehead (1973) conducted an investigation which found that teachers tend to rate children on the basis of their

use of BEV as less confident and less eager than children who do not use this dialect. Whereas Goodman (1965) had earlier asserted that the mismatches between the child's nonstandard dialect and the standard dialect encountered in beginning reading materials account for reading difficulties, he lated rejected this hypothesis. With Buck, Goodman (1973) now proposes that achievement in reading may be affected more by the negative valence attached to nonstandard dialects in school settings than by characteristics of the dialects themselves. Along with other Americans, speakers of BEV have receptive though not necessarily productive control over the standard dialect. Such speakers comprehend with facility standard American English. His research with chilldren led Goodman to conclude that although proficient readers make fewer dialect miscues (errors) than non-proficient readers, dialect miscues themselves do not interfere with the reading process.

Thus, while the incidence of low reading achievement among children who speak BEV is high, the data do not support a casual relationship between the dialect itself and their performance.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Brandes and Brewer (1977) enumerate four possible options for speakers of divergent, nonstandard dialect: a) the traditional grammarian approach-establish one standard dialect and require all persons to use it; b) the

laissez-faire approach - allow all persons to use their indigenous dialects both in and out of the classroom; c) the nationalistic approach - establish (or perpetuate) homogeneous educational settings in each of which the local dialect would be used; and d) the multi-dialectal approach - teach persons to be competent in at least the formal and informal dialects of their region, and to be knowledgeable about when and where each dialect is preferred. Each of these alternatives has an equivalent for the teaching of reading.

1. First teach the child to speak standard dialect and then begin reading instruction in standard dialect.

The instructional strategies employed to accomplish this goal can vary widely. In the linguistic enrichment method, literature, music, drama and such teacher strategies as modeling and expansion are used to stimulate the child's oral language production in standard dialect. Cullinan, Jaggar, and Strickland (1974) for example, report that a literature-based oral language program significantly affected the ability of children who spoke BEV to produce standard English. More structured methods use such procedures as pattern drill and contrastive techniques. Borrowing from second-language teaching, the pattern drill method presents and then drills the student in specific standard dialect patterns. With younger children these drills may be dressed in the guise of a game. Peter Parrot, for

example, presents a pattern and then solicits its repetition from children. With older students, direct instruction with contrastive techniques teaches them what standard English is and how it differs from nonstandard English (Baratz, 1969).

The notion of delaying reading instruction until mastery of the standard dialect is accomplished has many difficulties. First, considering how heavily fraught with emotion learning to read is, it is doubtful whether most parents would be willing to allow the postponement of instruction for some indeterminate amount of time. Second, systematically training in a second dialect may imply a disparagement of the indigineous dialect and the home, family and friends to which the dialect has deep emotional ties. Third, peer groups, particularly of adolescents, may resist attempts to change communicative patterns which contribute to intra-group identification and cohesion (Pertz, 1971). Fourth, there is no evidence that training children to speak standard English will contribute to their sucess in reading. Rystrom (1968, 1970) conducted two studies to test the hypothesis that training first-grade children who speak BEV to use standard informal English will contribute to higher reading achievement. What he found was quite the reverse. Dialect training did not result in better dialect performance. And, dialect training had a negative effect on the decoding skills

of the children who had received the instruction.

2. Use instructional materials written in the nonstandard dialect.

This approach opts for dialect readers for initial reading instruction with the use of transitional materials to introduce standard English gradually. Besides removing the inconsistencies between the child's own dialect and what appears in initial reading material, this approach claims that the use of the child's dialect would be highly motivating, as well. (Baratz, 1969).

A fundamental question in evaluating this option is whether or not instruction in the child's native dialect contributes to higher achievement. In one experiment, Keisler and Stern (1969) report that black preschoolers learned significantly more about the content of instruction (sea animals) when the commentary was provided in standard English than when it was presented in BEV. Cagney (1977) reported a study of the listening comprehension achievement of kindergartners and first-graders when stories were presented in standard English and BEV. Results indicated that reading stories to children in their own dialect even when the oral reader was proficient in the dialect, did not improve listening comprehension. Nolen (1972) found that second- and fourth-grade children who spoke BEV did not demonstrate any reliable differences in performance in the recall of reading

material, when it was presented both in standard and BEV forms. Apparently, the assumption that the use of dialect materials will facilitate achievement is not substantiated.

There are other problems with this approach, as well. First, it is likely that the negative attitudes surrounding BEV would result in opposition on the part of parents and community leaders to its "perpetuation" in written form in beginning readers. Indeed, attempts to introduce dialect readers even on an experimental basis in the United States have met with much resistance. Second, since there are several regional dialects in the United States, logically these too would have to be presented in beginning readers in their respective locales. The proliferation andexpense of additional reading material might well be rejected by taxpayers. Third, the receptive control by BEV speakers over standard English, and the orthographic consistency across all dialects in American usage*would seem to justify the use of standard dialect materials. Fourth, the absence of any clear-cut evidence to associate dialect with poor school achievement, as noted earlier, makes questionable the use of instructional materials specifically prepared in dialect.

* Except where an author uses a special spelling to indicate a particular dialect

3. Allow the child to translate materials written in standard dialect into the indigenous dialect.

Goodman (1965) advises that children should be encouraged to read material the way they speak. If the meaning of the passage is not altered, then the child is assumed to have read it successfully. Rigg (1978) notes that dialect miscues occur all the time. The reader normally translates from the extraneous dialect into her or his own dialect. If the passage says, he's in hospital, as it might if written by a British author, the American is likely to read it as he's in the hospital. While the reader has altered the surface structure, the deep structure or underlying meaning remains intact. Likewise, if a child who speaks BEV reads The dog looks funny as The dog he look funny, there has been no violation of meaning.

Success of this approach will depend on at least two conditions. First, overcoming the resistance of school personnel and parents to what might appear to them as a procedure which reinforces unacceptable linguistic behavior both in those who demonstrate it themselves, and in those who are exposed to it via oral reading. Second, providing teachers with sufficient knowledge of the dialect so they do not equate dialect difference with reading error.

4. Use of the language experience approach (LEA).

In this method, beginning reading instruction uses individually - and group-dictated stories as the initial reading material.

The material is encoded exactly as it is dictated, preserving all of its dialect features, but translating it into standard spelling. The assumption in this approach is that preserving the essence of the child's language in a meaningful context which represents the child's own experience, makes the best bridge between the oral and written forms of the language.

Smith (1977) however, cautions that the use of orally dictated material might impede children from making the important distinction between spoken and written language. Another factor to be considered in the use of a LEA is the negative reception it might receive for its possible reenforcement of a low-prestige dialect. Despite these qualifications, Hall's review of the research(1977) led her to conclude that the LEA is an effective way to teach reading and related communication skills.

While there are advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the four instructional alternatives, there is no hard evidence to support the use of any one of them in teaching reading to speakers of a non-standard dialect such as BEV. Decisions as to which approach to employ must be made then not from empirical data, but on the basis of pedagogical theory and the effect of psychological, social, and political factors.

Emotional and social factors now appear to be more significant in affecting the school performance of nonstandard dialect speakers than linguistic factors. Because the teacher is the primary agent

of instruction in schools, and has a great impact on the child's acceptance in school, it is essential that the teacher possess the appropriate knowledges, attitudes, and skills of instruction for nonstandard dialect speakers. Such competencies would fall into three broad categories:

a) linguistic - including an understanding of the nature of language and dialect, and the features of the specific nonstandard dialect of concern;

b) social/psychological - including an understanding of and respect for the cultural context represented by the dialect;

c) pedagogical - including a thorough acquaintance with reading theory and methodology, and special language enrichment strategies.

Perhaps the flower girl's sentiment is, after all, just a romantic dream. Yet, if we are interested in a world where worth is not measured by how one looks or speaks, then we must build acceptance of diversity, linguistic and otherwise. This is the most basic competence of all.

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